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The Pursuit of the Lucky Clew

By the author of "Nicholas Carter"

(Continued)

After paying for his meal, he left the cafe and sought his hotel. Upon his arrival there he 'phoned to the American Cab Company and ordered a carriage to be in readiness in front of the hostelry on the stroke of eight o'clock, designating a certain cabman of the company's employ as his driver.

This done, he inquired of the hotel clerk and learned that a small trunk had arrived for him. At Nick's direction this was taken up to his room.

When again the detective emerged, it was eight o'clock. He was dressed as the clerk had last seen him, but under his arm he carried a package that might have contained his laundry.

After greeting the cabman, Nick placed the bundle beneath the seat inside and directed his man to drive north to Broad Street until he had received further orders.

It was at least half an hour later that the detective signaled to the man on the box, and, leaning part way out of the carriage, he said:

"Stop within a block of the Argile Cemetery."

When at last the horses were stopped, the detective stepped out upon the pavement. He gave the driver a coin.

"Buy yourself something to drink in the meantime. Drink it alone, and drink it as soon as it leaves the bottle. You had better keep this package of mine under your arm. Don't let go of it, as you value your soul."

"How long shall I wait Mr.—, eh?" The cabman never went further in pronouncing Nick Carter's name than that. The detective had schooled him too well.

"An hour to the dot. I'll probably be back in less time. If I am not back within the limit don't wait for me."

"I'll go hunt you up," whispered the faithful cabman.

"You might have too long a hunt."

The detective was off upon the trail again.

From the point where Nick had left the carriage, the city was

not built up, but was a series of open lots, upon which grass and weeds had been allowed to grow at will and unmolested. The cemetery fence—a low iron structure—could be approached from the vacant lots upon either side of it from the two streets which bounded it on the east and west.

It was a somewhat small burial ground. The plots had long ago been sold. Many of the original purchasers, as well as their succeeding families, were buried side by side until there was no one remaining to care for the mounds of earth.

The cemetery company, finding no profit in the undertaking, had abandoned the entire seven acres or so to the none too careful hands of a watchman, who stayed there by day to keep wayward children from picking wild flowers, and was too fond of his bed to think of the place by night.

He was a good old man and rather wise, and he used to say: "What's the use of locking up a dead house? People outside don't want to get in, and the people inside can't get out!" But the old man did not know that he lived in a very wicked world, and he did not know there was a certain kind of people outside who put a price upon the people inside. And this was why the Argile had become a prey to the body snatchers. One robbery had been detected, but Nick Carter knew that it was neither the first nor the only one.

By now he had arrived at the low fence. He glanced quickly about him. In the distance ahead a small house loomed up against a street lamp, which flickered at the next corner.

Nick decided that this was the vault. He dropped to his hands and knees and began to crawl among the graves. Once he stopped and shut off the light of his pocket lamp, and listened. It sounded like a footstep somewhere behind him. It stopped. His hand fingered his revolver nervously.

He lay there fully ten minutes, and then moved on, slowly. When he had reached the vault he waited again, but only the chirp of the crickets broke the stillness. He pressed the button of his lamp and flashed the light upon the door before him. He examined the lock. It was an old-time affair, and easily picked.

In another moment Nick Carter was inside the vault.

There was but one box in the place. It contained an empty

coffin. Two lids rested against the wall. The detective examined the floor with the aid of his lamp. There were many footprints there in the dust, but one in particular caught his attention. This he measured carefully. Then, taking a piece of paper from his pocket, he marked the dimensions upon it.

His attention was next turned upon the empty coffin. This he examined very closely. At last a slight cry escaped his lips. He picked up a small particle that might have been a piece of leather. This was placed in tissue paper and inserted in his wallet.

He noted that there were stains upon the silk lining of the coffin.

Leaving this he opened the door cautiously, and, going out into the night, he carefully locked it again. Once more he examined footprints, they were those about the door. In the soft earth he made note of three that were like the one he had seen upon the floor of the vault.

Nick Carter's work was done for the night.

He crawled back to the fence, and was soon beside the carriage door.

"I had just about given you up," was the cabman's greeting. "It's been fifty-five minutes, and I hope as how you was successful, sir."

"Never had better luck in my life, cabby," answered Nick.

"Here's your package, sir. I didn't let it go out of my hands."

Nick thanked him, took the package, and, with his hand upon the door, said:

"The Union League: Make it in twenty minutes if it costs you both your horses."

Nick stepped quickly inside and closed the door. As he did so, he felt the grip of a pair of strong hands about his throat.

He was not the only occupant of the hurrying cab!

With a determined effort he drew his foe from him.

Then Nick Carter made a spring for the man before he could attack him again. He bore him back among the cushions fully determined to throttle him to death, but at that moment the vehicle stopped. Where were they? The detective's foe threw open the door and made a leap for the outside.

Nick Carter grabbed at him but missed him by a hair.

"Some other time!" cried the man, as he vanished.

Before the door stood the frightened cabman.

Nick was calm.

"How long were you away from your horses?" he asked.

"I took one drink, sir."

"That was one drink too many, sir!" said Nick. "To the Union League!"

CHAPTER IV

MAN TO MAN

The unexpected intruder caused a delay in the cab's progress which brought it in front of the Union League just two minutes after the directed time. As the panting horses came to a halt the door swung open quickly, and out stepped a man. The cabby, looking down, stared with amazement.

He had many experiences with the great detective, and, perhaps, should not have been surprised at anything which occurred with the detective as the central actor. However, he was greatly puzzled, now, for the man who had just alighted from his vehicle was a typical society swell! He was sure it could not be Nick Carter, for Nick Carter had worn a light plaid business suit when they had left the vicinity of the Argile Cemetery. The man whom he now saw was in full evening dress. A crush silk hat was upon the head where a soft traveling cap should have been. Patent leather shoes were upon the feet where low russet gaiters were looked for. Until the man spoke, the cabby was in a wild quandary.

"What's the matter, cabby?" asked the man, who was none other than the detective.

"How the devil, sir——" the cabby began.

Nick Carter smiled.

"Oh, you refer to the clothes?"

"You ought to get a job in a variety show as a lightning change artist, sir."

"A detective is expected to know a little of every other trade," said Nick, as he handed another bundle to the much amused driver.

"Take this and drop it into my room at the hotel. Here's my key.

Room twenty. Second floor. Return and wait here for me. Say in two hours. That will be about eleven-thirty. Wait till I come out if you have to wait all night. Good-by for now." And the detective, lighting one of his favorite cigars, walked leisurely up the steps of the clubhouse.

At the door he handed a card to a bell boy with instructions that it should be delivered to Col. Chesterton. He sat down upon a chair in the parlor, while he waited for his friend, who soon made an appearance and greeted him warmly.

"Awful glad you came, Carter. I've been telling some of the boys that I expected you. In fact," and here the colonel lowered his voice to a whisper, "in fact, I've made a wager on you."

"How so?" Nick asked.

"I bet that you would keep your word to me."

"You've won."

"Of course, I've won. I wish that everything in my life was as certain as your word. You said you'd be here, and here you are, and my friend Donelson is loser by fifty dollars."

Why had Dr. Donelson dared to wager upon his appearance? Nick asked himself—and the mental answer that came to him added strength to the rope that the detective was twining about the physician's neck.

"But come," said the colonel. "Let me introduce you to some of the old boys. That fifty is worth a bottle of wine, at least."

And as the two men linked arms, they started down the hallway. The first person they met was the physician. He was just coming out of the telephone booth, and, as he caught sight of Nick Carter, he could not conceal his astonishment.

"This is my friend, Mr. Carter," said the colonel, in significant tones. "Perhaps now you will agree with me that he is a man who never breaks his word."

"The fifty is yours," said the amazed physician.

"Let me introduce Dr. Henry Donelson, Mr. Carter," the colonel continued.

"We have met before, I believe," was the detective's comment as he extended his hand to meet that of the doctor.

(To be continued)